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The Relationship between Education Quality and the Young Women's Well-being Perception

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Abstract

The endless reform in our education system is searching for quality which implies, at the student's level, positive results in evaluation, progress in the knowledge volume and continuity of studies (as opposed to abandonment). For physical education quality is to fulfil two major requirements: to instil in students the values and skills of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and to enhance their overall growth and harmonious development. The purpose of this study is to investigate the results of a 12 years long physical education teaching over young women upon graduation from high school. The main aspects discussed are related with their own health perception and self image acceptance.

Methodology: 120 participants were involved in the study, all young women, students in the first years from 3 different faculties, randomly selected. The data were collected by applying a questionnaire related to the mentioned topic and to the number and content of physical education classes they had in high school.

Findings. The results are disturbing especially for a sample of young educated women. An unexpected percentage of health problems was reported, along with a poor acceptance of self image. The findings have not only a physical aspect but psychological connotations as well.

Conclusions. Considering this study results I appreciate that the quality standards in the physical education sector must be reconsidered. The highest management is formally responsible for the young generation's well-being, but at the same time it is the responsibility of all those involved in the educational process. The attention for recruiting educated and valuable teachers is a condition for evolving and also creating a valuable working force for society.

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1. Introduction. The endless reform in the Romanian education system is searching for quality which implies, at the student's level, positive results in evaluation, progress in the knowledge volume and continuity of studies (as opposed to abandonment). On a long term quality in education means:

- Access to the labour market according to the obtained degree level;
- Continuity of studies at higher level and contributions to develop the studied domain and connected sciences;
- Success in the domain of competence (Jensen & Bruisma, 2005).

The quality of an educational system can be certified by reference to a standard. Considering the PISA test as an international standard, we find that Romania ranks on the 49th place considering the results obtained in 65 countries (www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2009). This objective and external criterion ranks Romanian educational system as being less than of mediocre quality.

For physical education, quality means to fulfil two major requirements: to instil in students the values and skills of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and to enhance their overall growth and harmonious development. The purpose of this study is to investigate the results of a 12 years long physical education teaching over the young women upon graduation from high school. The main aspects discussed are related with their own health perception and self image acceptance, two aspects of subjective well-being related to perceptions, needs and expectations of respondents.

2. Methods. For this study I used the questionnaire method, through which I could gather information about the experience of our female students in physical education, as well as their expectations and needs related to this subject. This study involved 120 female students, all in their first year of study in the three faculties of the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. The subjects were chosen randomly.

This study is mainly addressed to female students because in our university they represent more than 60% of the total number of the students. The statistical and quantitative analysis of the responses allowed me to reach some conclusions and considerations regarding the aims of physical education at the end of high school education.

3. Questionnaire. In order to assess more accurately the female students' opportunities, real need and possible difficulties in the work groups, I applied a questionnaire with 8 simple questions to which I expected very brief answers. I requested personal data such as the date of birth or locality, but I did not ask the names of those who completed questionnaires. I have considered compulsory anonymity in order to get honest answers to delicate questions related to self-image or to their health status.

3.1 Year of birth. Although I obtained a wide range of birth dates, from 27 years old, the oldest, to 19 years old, the young and fresh high school graduates, the majority, i.e. 87,5% (105 of 120) was between the age 19-20 years old. Very close to age, those born the year before represent the next more important numerical group, meaning 11 girls, something less than 10 %. The 4 remaining students are in minority (3.3%) and they are aged between 24 and 27 years.

The conclusion to be drawn from this first set of data is that the vast majority of students at AES, are young, aged between 19 and 21. Exceptions are rare and concern usually young women, who already have a job which fails to satisfy them or cannot advance without following some form of higher education. For them the challenge is to deal with multiple roles which they assume by having a job, studying and sometimes having family responsibilities.

3.2 High graduation year confirms what I have already known from the previous analysis, namely that the vast majority (87.5%) of female students in the first year is part of the last class of high school. This data emphasize the information regarding the fact that at least 15 graduates from previous years were not included in some form of secondary education, were unable to follow a systematic program of physical training in the last year or even more.

3.3 The inhabitancy provides information about their provenience background and where the subjects grew up. Considerable is the fact that the vast majority lives in the cities, usually in large cities in the south and east of the country. Thus, 91% of the students come from urban areas and only 9% from rural areas, which say a lot about the educational quality in schools and high schools from small towns or from countryside.

Therefore we face a generation of forthcoming intellectuals raise on the pavement, in cities more or less crowded and increasingly polluted. It is perhaps our last chance and, therefore, duty to convince them of the benefits of physical exercise.

Our group can be considered homogeneous in terms of age and background - urban, in this case- in which they grew and developed.

3.4 This question gets closer to our branch and refers to the amount of physical education classes that students have attended the previous year, respectively in the last year of high school. The response options are few, but they provide valuable information about the recent „history” of the questionnaires respondents in physical training and in its continuity and frequency. The response options are:

- 2 hours per week for 20 respondents, representing a rate of 17%;
- 1 hour per week for most of the respondents, respectively 67 or 56%, meaning more than a half;
- no physical education classes for 12 high school graduates, respondents from the last class, adding one student who has been medically exempted in the twelfth grade and 15 graduates of the previous classes: in total 28 students, meaning 23.3%, who have been less concerned or not concerned at all about physical exercise for at least 1 year.
- part-time, which means that although the schedule included one hour of physical education a week, the activity itself took a half or quarter of an hour, the attendance was either compulsory or required only when the control test were scheduled. The number of these responses is small, only 5 students, but in conjunction with responses to the next question, it begins to have a meaning.

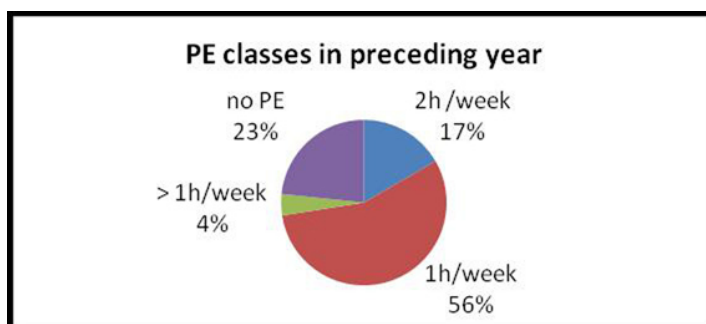


Fig. 1- Physical activity

The group is characterized by the lack of homogeneity in terms of physical activity of the students in the previous year of taking up the university. The heterogeneity is supported by the high value of the coefficient of variation, calculated on the basis of responses to this question, which in this case is equal to almost 68%. Remember that the value of this coefficient is the opposite of the homogeneity of the team/group and the figures above 35% mean a large dispersion around the central value.

3.5 The answers to the fifth question concern the content of physical education lessons and those who participated in lessons in the past year, implying three quarters of the 120 students who answered the questionnaire. As we shall see, however, this number is only true in theory, because of the 91 students who state that they did not do anything or almost anything during these lessons. Thus, the percentage of those who can provide useful information on the content of physical education lessons decreases below 70% (69.16%). Of the

83 remaining girls, 39, or 47%, participated in classic structured lessons, including means of several sports and 44, or 53%, chose mono sport lessons or the teacher preferred this type of lessons.

In this analysis should not be neglected the material basis of schools, which is by itself a significant constraint in choosing the work means and the methods. Concerning mono sports lessons, the choice is between gymnastics and a sports game, usually basketball or volleyball and very seldom handball (only in two cases). The explanation for this choice is, I think, the absence of sufficient space to work with means of handball and especially when the weather conditions require inside practice. Specific means for volleyball and basketball enable the physical education lesson to take place in smaller spaces by placing several goals or nets across the room. This reduces the action space of each student (player), but is gaining in the number of those who play effectively at the same time. The student will make less effort to reach the ball or the opponent, given the smaller space, but will be longer in motion.

3.6 “Are you satisfied with the way you look?” The question aims to clarify how students perceive their own image and the responses given indicate that physically they are not satisfied and less confident. In order to have a clearer view on this aspect I will enunciate the following question and the interpretation will gather both questions.

3.7 „What would you like to change in your appearance?” The answers to this question are intended to guide the development of aerobics programs and physical training to those body parts and muscle groups that most female students in a particular group want mainly to work out.

Only 20 students (17%) say that they are satisfied with their look and do not want to change anything in their appearance. 24 other students, although they claim they are happy as they are, however, would like to change something, if they had the opportunity. The percentage is 20%. Most of them, however, 70 students, at a rate of 63%, say they are not satisfied with their appearance and they would like to lose a few pounds and in extreme cases to change their entire appearance.

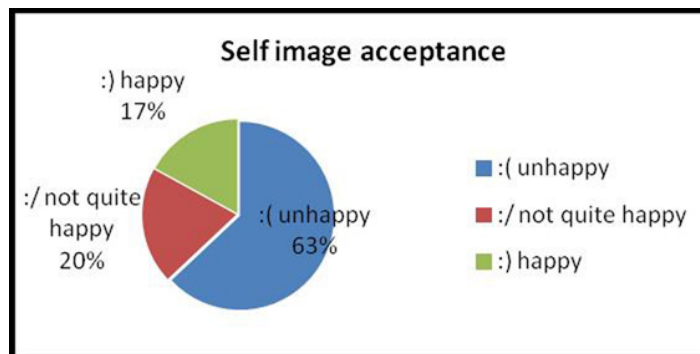


Fig. 2 - Self image

The most common problem they face is weight, many believing that they weigh too much and just only a few considering that they weigh too little. The next most common problem is concentrated in the region between waist and knees: size must be thinned, abs must be defined, thighs and buttocks must be free of cellulite, or toned, or increased in volume. Some want to grow in height, only three are worried about bad attitude and two are unhappy because they consider they have a bad construction.

What is interesting and disturbing at the same time is that a significant number of subjects had problems to accept their own image. Landmarks that society promotes are very severe for most girls and put them in a position of inferiority, repercussions on self esteem and confidence. Self-esteem is a psychological component of self-image. Body image reflects how close a person's actual shape is to their ideal shape (Furnham, Badmin, & Snead, 2002). Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves, and our behaviour clearly reflects those feelings. Poor opinion of our body can cause low self esteem and self confidence.

Girls' desire to improve their physical appearance is a point in favour of our discipline, in order to exploit girls' motivation and to participate periodically and consistently in physical education classes, as well as in independent practice exercise. Once their needs and expectations are known, we are able more easily to capture the interest of students for physical education activities and the progress will give them the satisfaction of achieving personal goals, and we hope that the knowledge gained will be applied in the future when promotional or accumulation constraints of credits will no longer be a priority.

3.8 The last question with two possible answers is: „Do you have health problems?” The number who say they have health problems is 63, and the percentage is 52.5%, the remaining 57, or 47.5% say they are healthy. The first reaction facing such statistics is of real concern. If of the 120 very young girls, most of them around 20 years old, more than half say they have health problems, we are facing not isolated cases, but we are dealing with a phenomenon. Whether they have back pain, calcium falls or they get easily tired, these girls have reasons to consider that they are not perfectly healthy. This perception, together with typical youth lifestyle - fast forward - can have repercussions on physical performance, but also on the intellectual level for students and people aspiring to a job.

For the physical education teacher these problems constitute a risk because they may occur or be aggravated during exercise and determine adjustments to volume, intensity and density of effort. He must mediate the conflict between asking for more in order to ensure progress in fitness plan and softening this request in order to help the weakest to keep up. Value group method can be a solution in this case, as well as the directions of those who cannot handle a particular type of effort that they are submitted to (I mean in fitness lessons where the weights, number of repetitions as well as endurance breaks may be more easily individualized).

It is obvious that not all students who say they have health problems and illnesses are serious, because if so, the number of students attending the course could halve due to medical exemptions, which does not happen, the average percentage of medical exemptions at AES is 4-5% of the total number of students.

4. Discussion. Female students' responses about their perception about of wellbeing, with its two aspects investigated on this occasion: image and health, constitutes a topic of discussion that deserves our attention both as teaches but also as discipline specialist, which aims to contribute to strengthen health and physical harmonious development of those we guide to practice physical exercise. The survey results show that for most girls these two goals are not yet achieved and they assume that the chance of achieving them decreases with age. Time works against them and us as teachers who promote these ideals and still have the enthusiasm to pursue them together with the students that we train.

The correlation coefficient between data streams providing the answers to these two questions is very weak ($r=0.16$). I have calculated this ratio to determine if there is a significant link between those who have health problems and those who are insecure about their appearance. The result shows that the same subjects did not respond only affirmatively or only negatively to both questions.

The fact that more than 50% of the students surveyed are dissatisfied with the way they look and say they have health problems is very serious, warning with regard to physical and some psychological aspects characteristic this age. This condition is caused by a variety of factors: economic, social, cultural, environmental and educational. The combination of these factors in the difficult context of Romania's recession is certainly the reason of under evaluation of life, with all the effects arising therefore.

By the nature of our profession, we teachers can influence this state of affairs only by means of training and education within our reach. In order to provide information, to form habits and to equip the students with skills that meet their real needs, we need in our turn information and I refer here to the information provided by the very beneficiaries of our work, based on which we can plan, organize, coordinate and motivate efficiently the activity in which we are partners, pursuing the same objectives. It is clear that we can rely on our intuition or experience in assessing opportunities for students, but through actual data scientifically collected we can focus

more precisely in setting realistic goals to achieve in what students are intrinsically motivated to invest time and energy.

Conclusion. In this paper I have focused on two aspects of subjective wellbeing: health and body image as perceived by the study's subjects. The objective data that I have for the studied group have as source anthropometrical measurements and they are within normal limits (e.g. body mass index BMI= 19.28), but there are studies showing that when speaking about the quality of life "objective and subjective indicators are weakly correlated" (R. Cummins, 2000).

The educational, medical or social service quality can be appreciated only of the beneficiary of this service. Subjective assessment of high school graduates in relation to the purpose of physical education is positive. The results refer to a sample of young educated females who through access to information can make positive choices in relation to lifestyle and health maintenance. "Education may help individuals maintain or improve their health, mostly by means of their enhanced knowledge of health issues, information availability and cognitive skills" (Cutler and Lleras-Muney, 2006).

The quality of high school education is uneven between urban and rural areas, and therefore the odds to undergo some form of higher education are clearly against youth living in the countryside. There are NGOs in Romania that aim at the inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but a coherent state policy is required in this regard. The effects of such strategies will echo, ultimately enhancing the quality of life. "More educated individuals report higher sense of control and higher self-esteem, which are associated with better health" (Ross and Mirowsky 1999).

There are management institutions and strategies in Romania to enhance the quality of education at all levels. In my opinion there is also a gap between the bureaucratic part of these politics systems (plans, reports, procedures) and student achievements which are products of the education system.

The government is formally responsible about the young generation wellbeing, but at the same time it is the responsibility of all those involved in the educational process, because each teacher is the first system – student interface. The attention for recruiting educated and valuable teachers is a condition for evolving and creating also a valuable working force for society. Unfortunately just a few valuable elements are really motivated to teach in the Romanian educational system (Pop C. 2011).

I will add a few concluding recommendations that can lead to an increase in vigour and health of teenagers *and then* to improve the quality of physical education in schools and high schools;

- To develop critical thinking which enables young people to choose exercises and practice methods suited to their age and personal goals;
- To encourage physical activities outdoors, during which air, sunlight and water can act to harden and strengthen the body's health;
- To involve parents in adopting a healthier life style;
- To reinforce the scholar competition system and encourage team work;
- To encourage the students to set realistic goals to motivate physical activities.

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